

LECTURE NOTES: EMGT 234

THE BRENT SPAR CONTROVERSY: AN EXAMPLE OF RISK COMMUNICATION GONE WRONG

SOURCE:

Ragnar E. Lofsted and Ortwin Renn
Risk Analysis, Vol 17, No. 2, pp. 131-135, 1997

1. INTRODUCTION

Brent Spar:

Oil storage platform owned by Shell/Exxon
in the North Atlantic Sea.

Proposed sinking is possibly **largest** environmental **controversy** thus far. Sequence of events:

1. Shell **applied** for deep sea disposal.
2. Shell qualified chosen option **as Best Practicable Environmental Option** (BPEO).
3. British Government defended Shell choices.
4. Greenpeace mounted a massive campaign against the dumping.
5. As a result the German, Danish, Swedish governments against its dumping.

Arguments were many, but **the environmental reality** of the options **played little part** as the controversy escalated.

Paper:

1. Report the case history,
2. Shed light on case with regard to the ideas and conclusions put forward in the risk communication literature
3. Draw some general conclusions with respect to risk communication.

2. CASE HISTORY

Early 1994:

Shell and Exxon wants to dispose BRENT SPAR.

BRENT SPAR = OIL STORAGE BUOY

- Started operation in 1976.
- Non operational for 5 years.
- Now redundant.
- Located in deep water (more than 75 meters), weighted more than 4000 tons (actual weight was 14,500 tons).

Important:

1. Not required by law to dispose on land.
2. The International Maritime Organisation's (IMO) guidelines stipulate that sinking in the ocean is an **acceptable option**.

Shell commissioned **30 separate studies** to consider the **technical, safety, and environmental implications** of its disposal.

Four different options:

1. Disposal on land
2. Sinking the buoy at its current location
3. Decomposition of the buoy on the spot
4. Deep sea dumping (but within U.K. waters)

Conclusions of different studies:

Option 4: BPEO mainly due to low cost.

Option 1: 4 times cost of Option 4; High Risk for workers;
Low but measurable risk for environment.

Option 2: Unfeasible or environmentally harmful.

Option 3: Unfeasible or environmentally harmful.

SHELL'S CHOICE = OPTION 4 (Obviously)

Asked U.K. Dep. of Trade and Industry DTI for approval.

December 1994 : DTI approved.

February 16, 1995 : U.K. Government notified other European nations following **the Oslo-Paris Convention** (=disclosure of plans affecting the marine-environment). **No country** responded within **60-day deadline** for objections imposed by the Convention (i.e., by April 16).

Early May, 1995 : U.K. issued Shell the license.

WHAT WENT WRONG?

April 30, 1995 : **Greenpeace** occupies Brent Spar . Crisis Starts: Brent Spar controversy hits **the media** with pictures of Greenpeace activists **braving the water cannons of Shell's** tugboats.

May 9, 1995 : **German** Environmental and Agricultural **Ministries protested** to the U.K. Government that land disposal had not been significantly investigated. **U.K. Government rejected** as objections was made after the deadline.

May 23, 1995 : Shell was finally able to remove the Greenpeace activists from the platform.

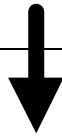
IT SHOULD BE NO SURPRISE THAT:
Controversy did not die down with
protesters removed from the platform.

Throughout May:

- Brent Spar high on the media agenda.
- Greenpeace mobilized politicians against deep sea sinking by collecting signatures
- On May 26, **conservative groups** joined Green action groups in **asking for a consumer boycott** of Shell gasoline stations.
- Boycott effective in Germany, Holland, and parts of Scandinavia.

June 1, 1995 : Poll suggests that **74% of the population** were willing to boycott Shell gas stations. (Greenpeace financed poll).

North Sea Protection Conference, June 5, 1995:
Attended by the **Environmental Ministers** from the countries surrounding the North Sea and by **the EU Environmental Commissioner**, Ritt Bjerregaard.



Conference Opening:

- All official delegates (except the U.K. and Norway) **condemned** the sinking of the platform
- U.K. Environmental Minister, John Gummer, **was singled out** for a large amount of the critique (=media topic).

June 6, 1995 : **German Environmental Minister**, Angela Merkel demanded complete halt of deep ocean disposal, including oil platforms.

June 6, 1995 : **G7 summit** in Canada, **Helmut Kohl** informed **John Major** that stopping the sea dumping of Brent Spar was "not the looniness of a few greens but a Europe-wide, worldwide trend for the protection of our seas."

June 16, 1995 : **Greenpeace activists** occupied platform **again** and made claims off **large quantities of heavy metals** on Brent Spar not declared by Shell.

June 16, 1995 : Protesters occupied **Shell headquarters** in the Netherlands.

Throughout Crisis :

- Shell U.K. received little support. The U.K. Government tried to persuade its European allies that dumping of BS was BPEO, but these arguments fell on deaf ears.
- Shell U.K.'s position was criticized by Shell Germany and Shell Netherlands.
- Shell received very negative PR in Netherlands & Germany.
 1. Shell's 1728 stations in Germany,
 2. Gasoline **sales** were **20% below average**,
 3. 200 stations were **threatened with attacks**,
 4. 50 stations were **vandalized**,
 5. 2 stations were **fire bombed** and **shots were fired** at another.
- Germans were writing letters to the U.K. DTI and **enclosing money** to help to pay for on-shore disposal and **German women were sending pictures of their children** to Shell U.K. urging its chairman, Dr. Chris Fay, to stop the planned sinking for the benefit of **future generations**.
- Shell Germany received over **11,000 letters** complaining about the disposal.

June 20, 1995 : Shell called off plans to sink Brent Spar, only hours before it was due to be sunk, citing economic problems due to the boycott.

The U.K. Government **felt betrayed**, and the Energy Minister, Tim Eggar, **stated** that **Shell should have gone through** with the deep sea dumping as it is the BPEO.

Greenpeace **applauded the action** and announced it would help Shell to find an acceptable environmental solution.

Poll in Germany : **82%** of interviewees support boycott as a means for consumers to fight environmentally harmful practices.

June 27, 1995 : Shell started a damage limitation exercise;

1. Germany, One-page advertisement **in 100 national and local** newspapers with title: "**We will change.**" Shell admitted to mistakes and ill-advised Brent Spar policies, but maintained that the decision to dump at sea was **correct on technical and environmental grounds.**
2. Denmark, Shell sent letters to 250,000 credit card holders explaining their policies.

July 1995 : Shell asked DNV (Det Norske Veritas = "the Norwegian Truth") to investigate the contents of Brent Spar's empty storage tanks.

Fall, 1995 : Independent inventory was published confirming the figures provided by Shell.

A few weeks prior to the report:

Greenpeace admitted it had **made a mistake** about the **quantity of pollutants**, but maintained that the sinking of Brent Spar would have been wrong.

2.1. The Risks of Deep Ocean Disposal

Shell's studies: The risks were quantified.

- Occupational risk was highest with land dismantling (Option 1) and lowest with on the spot sinking (Option 2).
- Sinking BS in deep sea (Option 3) did not pose any **significant** environmental problems. Inventory of hazardous materials minimal = less than 1 % of the amounts discharged by boats in the North Sea in the course of 1 year.

However;

- **Local** environmental contamination in the deep had not been thoroughly researched, although overall experts maintained that the impact was minute relative to existing levels of ocean pollution.

- The U.K. Select Committee on Science and Technology **confirmed the low risk situation** and expressed approval of **the deep sea disposal option**.

- **May 1996** : UK Government's Independent Scientific Group confirmed the scientific assessment of Shell's analysis. But did conclude that:
 1. more open procedures were needed,
 2. greater mobilization of scientific expertise,
 3. international discussions were needed,
 4. public perceptions needed to be accounted for.

3. REASONS WHY SHELL'S RISK COMMUNICATION PROGRAM FAILED

Questions:

- What went wrong?
 - Why did Shell lose its credibility?
- Why was the public protest so overwhelming?
 - Why was the boycott so successful?

Answer:

Wrong risk communication strategy
by Shell and the U.K. Government.

- **Shell declared that deep sea disposal was BPEO** and (2) the U.K. Government in the second for standing by Shell.



"David and Goliath effect".

Greenpeace = David, Shell = Goliath



"Brave Activists defeated Villain"

MEDIA LOVED IT

- **Shell was seen to be greedy.** Shell had money to choose more environmentally benign option (= land disposal). Shell lost credibility, as **the public** saw that it was no coincidence that the declared BPEO was also the cheapest option.
- **Shell was seen as an easy target to boycott.** Public experienced the "**feel good factor**," as they felt that they had acted in an "**environmentally correct**" way without any discomfort or change of habit. (Motorist unaware of large holdings of Shell in other industries than the Oil industry).
- Politicians were heavily engaged in condemning Shell as it was an **easy way of attracting green votes**.

Note: Germany, Denmark, and Sweden (largest protestors) do not have any oil reserves of their own and supporting public has no economical consequences

- **Moral issue: The sanctity of the deep ocean.** One should not dump in it as it supposedly has not been dumped in before. It should remain pristine and untouched.

Question:

Why did the Brents Star Controversy remain on the media Agenda?

- **Good Pictures** (provided by Greenpeace) e.g., pictures of activists on the platform being sprayed by Shell's tugboats.
- **A series of negative factors attached to Shell/U.K :**
 1. Shell/UK Government are seen to have low public trust,
 2. Shell's actions did little to instill greater trust.
 3. Shells messages were confusing and arrogant.
 4. U.K. Government was **portrayed by the media** as siding with industry. Being both **arrogant and stubborn** did not help U.K's public image of **trustworthiness**.
- **Controversy dominated international meetings:**
 1. The North Sea Conference held in Denmark
 2. The G7 meeting in Canada. Brent Spar was highlighted this way because:
 - Confusion dump site location, enabling Greenpeace to spread the message: "North Sea is at risk".
 - "Free ride" effect for politicians, as most opposing nations do not have oil reserves of their own.

Question:

Given that the Brent Spar Controversy was on media agenda, why were Shell/U.K. not more effective in providing counter information to claims of Greenpeace?

- Shell/U.K adopted a **top-down approach** rather than a **dialogue approach**, the latter strongly supported by risk communication research.
- Shell not seen as trustworthy, Greenpeace is.
- Shell did not have **one voice**, Greenpeace did, which strengthened their argument and **amplified distrust**.
- Shell could not counter **the symbolic meaning** of dumping in the "pristine" deep sea.

John Shepherd,
Chairman of the Scientific Group on Decommissioning:
"If people have **an emotional response** to pristine areas such as Antarctica or the deep sea, and want them **to remain unpolluted**, it is not up to scientists to say this is irrational".

- Shell did not use the scientific expertise to counter Greenpeace claims. Scientists about deep sea and consequences of dumping Brent Spar were not consulted.
- The media coverage dominated by footage provided by Greenpeace. Greenpeace produced highly visible actions, forcing Shell to **react and defend** themselves.

4. LESSONS FOR RISK COMMUNICATION

- A company such as Shell should **have adopted a dialogue approach** before escalation of the cause.
- Industry needs to **develop more flexible communication strategies** to address criticisms from hostile groups e.g. independent peer review of actions that may mobilize public opposition.
- **Consult non-involved social scientists or media counselors** on how to deal with crisis should be sought from. In the Brent Spar case, such advice was sought only after the controversy was well established.
- **Multinationals should organize focus groups in different countries** to account for differences in public perceptions.

Eliminates the so-called "surprise" factor =
Necessity in order to reduce conflicts similar to Brent Spar.

- **Industry would benefit from a greater understanding of public concern.** It is a strategy that Greenpeace has employed successfully, enabling them to identify which environmental issues that have the greatest resonance for the public (e.g., whaling) and launch campaigns around these issues.

- **Multinationals should have uniform communication strategies both internally and between different countries.** Mixed messages do not help industry's communication efforts and amplify distrust.
- **Government licensing agencies should at all times claim independence of special interests.** Solidarity with the proposer may be seen in a bad light. Licensing agencies should emphasize control and accountability.
- **Industries and NGO's should strive to form alliances with well-respected allies.** With Brent 'Spar, Shell was only supported by the U.K. government. Greenpeace received support of several European governments, the European Union, and a large number of the European public.